



# How Not to Attack Animal Rights from an Environmental Perspective

A *reductio* is a philosophical attempt to prove an opponent wrong by showing that his/her position leads to an absurdity. Suppose someone wanted to argue that animals have rights, and that it is our obligation to prevent animal suffering. To perform a *reductio*, you would, for example, argue that this view requires us to lock up wolves that maul sheep, to punish cats that eat mice, and to turn our national parks into climate controlled comfort zones. When it works, a *reductio* is a marvelous philosophical tool; you can destroy your opponent's position while demonstrating your own subtlety and cleverness.

The problem is that *reductios* are often aimed at nothing more than straw men. Criticism is directed at a reduced, easier-to-attack, version of your opponent's position. In this case, you score against a position that no one really holds. In his 1988 State of the Union address, Ronald Reagan tried to make fun of budget allocations that fund unimportant scientific research. Unfortunately, he chose some very bad examples from the agricultural community. He ridiculed research efforts to find alternative crops like "blueberries, crawfish, and wildflowers." No one in Congress laughed. Each of them knew that agriculture is the largest industry in this country, that it faces stiff international competition, and that one answer to the crisis is to diversify crops. Reagan's attempt at a *reductio* backfired; he was caught tilting at a straw man.



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Mark Sagoff and Baird Callicott have recently aimed *reductios* at the animal rights movement. Arguing from an environmental perspective, and drawing on Aldo Leopold's land ethic, they have argued that animal rightists have views with absurd consequences. Their argument goes like this: Animal rights people believe that we have an obligation to prevent animal pain. The most animal pain occurs in the wild, in nature. If the animal rights people are correct, then it is our obligation to domesticate all of nature.

Here is Sagoff's characterization of what we would have to do if his animal rightist opponents were correct: "attempt a broad program of contraceptive care for animals in nature so that fewer will fall victim to an early and horrible death," and convert "our national wilderness areas, especially our national parks, into farms in order to replace violent wild areas with human, managed environments" (p. 6). Further, "starving deer in the woods might be adopted as pets; they might be fed in kennels. Birds that now kill earthworms may repair instead to



## COMMENT

birdhouses stocked with food — including textured soybean protein that looks and smells like worms. And to protect the brutes from cold, we might heat their dens or provide shelter for the all too many who freeze.” (p. 8) The reader is supposed to read these and laugh (although Sagoff does allow that some might take them as an ideal to be pursued).

I know a fair number of people who think seriously about what we owe animals. They include animal rightists and liberationists, along with scientists, citizens, veterinarians, and what have you. None of them, even the most radical liberationists, would take Sagoff's silly picture as an ideal to be emulated. All of them would respond as Sagoff wants us to do, by laughing. But some of them would laugh not only at the absurdities Sagoff describes. They would also chuckle at the fact that a professionally trained philosopher would expect reasonably minded people to accept his description as following from the views of animal rightists. simple acquaintance with animals is enough to insure that even a philosopher could make the distinction between domestic and wild animals. Even a philosopher could observe, given a little experience, that the interests, drives, needs, purposes, wants, and desires of animals differ according to their genetic makeup and social conditioning. Domestic animals have been bred for docility; generations of selection for desired traits have had the indirect consequence of producing species with little tolerance, or desire, for wild conditions.

Wild animals have not suffered the same fate. As a little observation would show, starving deer in the woods have great interest in finding food, but little interest in being adopted as pets. Birds that now kill earthworms have great desire to find a rainy lawn, but none in being fed textured soybean protein that looks and smells like worms. Brutes have a significant stake in finding a proper place for hibernation, but none in being provided a space heater. Unlike their domesticated cousins, wild animals are wholly unsuited to farm or zoo life. That is why keepers have such difficulty in getting new species to reproduce in captivity.

A little common sense would have revealed this fact to Sagoff and Callicott. Even on the strictest utilitarian calculus, being restrained, caged, and intensively managed, would cause wild animals a greater balance of pain over pleasure than freezing to death under normal conditions. Their reductio, like Reagan's, is directed at a straw man. ☐

# Animals.



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